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My Motherhood, My Way: A Sociological Study of Contemporary Employed Mothers in Kolkata

By Sanjukta Bhaumik¹, Sudhansubala Sahu²

Abstract

Motherhood in India has been understood primarily by placing mothers in the domestic space. A mother is constructed as a protector and the complete caregiver of her children. But there have been significant changes in the status of Indian women recently. In the 21st century, with suitable qualifications and employment opportunities, women have the choice to be economically independent and career-driven, which has a profound impact on their roles and responsibilities as protectors and caregivers in the home. It is essential to study and document how women in this generation have started to redefine their roles and negotiate what a mother's duties are at home. This study aims to make a systematic inquiry to understand the issues and challenges faced by employed mothers in everyday life and how they balance their career and childcare activities. Researchers investigate this through a qualitative study on mothers employed in different types of professions in the city of Kolkata. Data was collected by conducting in-depth interviews of around twenty-nine urban, upper-middle class employed mothers from different professional backgrounds to have a set of diverse narratives about their experiences and struggles. The key findings of this study provide an insight into the challenges that mothers face and their balancing mechanisms. Such studies have the scope to motivate many employed mothers by presenting some cases of women who have succeeded in breaking the stereotypical ideas of motherhood and are redefining their stories in more humane terms.

Keywords: Motherhood, Work-life balance, Matricentric feminism, In-depth interview, Grounded Theory

Introduction

Indian literature and films have always glorified mothers' roles as the ultimate caregivers and protectors. In real life as well, mothers are worshipped as goddesses, considered sacred as nature and nation, praised as the source of care, love, and emotion-building for their children. These social and cultural constructions of motherhood are largely drawn from religious and mythological texts in which the mother figure is portrayed as the complete caregiver for her children. The patriarchal nature of Indian society further reinforces these conservative narratives of mothers' roles by placing them at the core of domestic spheres. Motherhood is a multifaceted

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and interdisciplinary phenomenon which should be studied not only with the help of sociological theories but also mythology, history, politics, religion, anthropology and literature.

As a result of this socio-cultural legacy, motherhood has become a compulsion rather than a choice for most women in India. It is expected that women have some natural desire to have children and sacrifice their personal happiness and aspirations to raise them. *Manusmriti*³(Ghosh, 2018) states that a woman who bears children gets blessings from Gods and that their position in society is no less than a Goddess. Ramakrishna Mission⁴, famous for its secular approach towards religion, had a similar attitude towards motherhood. For instance, Shri Swami Ranganathananda⁵ (Ranganathananda,1992) said that motherhood was the highest spiritual transformation of wifehood. A mother's role is more divine than that of a wife because mothers never demand or take; they find happiness in giving. Bengal has described mothers either as a symbol of power or as the symbol of nationalism. Ramakrishna Paramahansa⁶ considered goddess *Kali*⁷ as his mother and the mother of the universe. Therefore, he described *Kali Ma* as the *Adi shakti*⁸ or the source of power and wisdom.

In colonial Bengal, the idea of motherhood served as a symbol of nationalism. The Bengali patriotic songs 'Ek Baar bidaay de Ma ghure ashi' (Bid me goodbye mother) or 'Mayer deowa mota kapur mathay tule ne re Bhai' (With coarse cloth of mother-cover your head brother) during the colonial period had an enormous impact on Indian sons in motivating them for the Nationalist movement. Jashodhara Bagchi (Bagchi, 2017), in her book, *Interrogating Motherhood*, has identified the critical contributions of some eminent Bengali writers to the formation of a 'Mother-India' image for Bengalis. She says that "If the worship of the mother goddess was the exclusive domain of Bengal/India, then the land itself became the mother" (Bagchi, 2017). This kind of idealization was appropriated by famous Indian political leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, who considered mothers as 'self-sacrificing souls' and, therefore there were symbolized as the core of patriotism during colonial rule in India (Kishwar, 1985). The nationalist adoration of motherhood had a wide-ranging impact on the ideological control over women. The depiction of 'ideal mothers' was a patriarchal trap to keep women out of privileges like education and professions that had been long dominated by men and confined them to the domestic sphere. Krishnaraj (2010) has argued that even socialism couldn't do justice to working mothers in India as mothers are still forced to work a 'double-shift'. Mothers working in IT sectors are still struggling to manage childcare and job responsibilities and often feel guilty for being working mothers.

In earlier times, Bengali⁹ middle-class women were mostly involved in government sector jobs. The joint family system of Bengali households helped them balance work and childcare activities. Bengali families used to think that mothers should be confined to the home and therefore, if required, mothers never hesitated to quit their jobs. The employed women were conditioned to believe in the 'intensive mothering' ideology in which women prioritize children over their careers. Women are pushed out of the workplace or reject promotions in order to spend more time childrearing. However, the entire scenario changed with the advent of economic

³ The Manusmriti is an ancient legal text of Hinduism.

⁴ Ramakrishna Mission is a spiritual organization brought into existence by Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa.

⁵ Swami Ranganathananda was the thirteenth President of the Ramakrishna Math.

⁶ *Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa was an Indian spiritual leader in 19th century Bengal*

⁷ Kali is a Hindu goddess and is considered to be the destroyer of evil forces.

⁸ As per Hindu mythology, Adi Shakti refers to the supreme female power.

⁹ Bengalis are an Indo-Aryan ethnolinguistic group native to the Bengal region in South-Asia.

liberalization and the growth of IT industries in Kolkata¹⁰. In recent times, the development of IT sectors and other private-sector jobs in some metro cities like Kolkata, Bangalore, Mumbai, and Delhi¹¹ have changed women's perception towards employment and motherhood. From the early 1990s, many employed mothers began challenging the dominant discourse of ideal motherhood.

In today's society, women define motherhood as a 'choice' that makes them more financially responsible towards their children, but managing jobs and children often make their lives complicated (Bhaumik, 2018). Existing literature shows how most employed mothers face several difficulties in balancing childcare activities and office work. Many women who are working and have small children say being a working mother makes it difficult for them to progress in their careers. Mothers are more than twice as likely as fathers to say they experience the "Second shift" or "Double burden" (Hochschild, 2012). Thus, the increase in the women labor force has given rise to a new plethora of controversy over whether motherhood is a desirable or undesirable phenomenon among employed mothers in Bengal.

Review of Literature

In their article, Dey and Das (2020) discuss the different dimensions of motherhood. According to them, Indian feminism does not pay much attention to mothers while Indian novels and mythologies glorify motherhood in many ways. Motherhood, in India, has witnessed a drastic turn in the modern era. Modernity played an essential role in reshaping women's lives as mothers. The authors argue that mothers in the 21st century achieved the opportunity to celebrate their motherhood on their terms. Modern mothers are not mere 'followers' of any ideological adoration of motherhood, instead, they tend to rewrite their own motherhood stories without getting influenced by any social or cultural bondage. Instead of being 24/7 caregivers for their children, mothers now focus on presenting themselves as role models for their children by managing childrearing and a job. Indian working mothers want to mother children with the utmost care and share economic burdens with their husbands. Many mothers from both urban and rural parts of India believe that motherhood is subjective and therefore they reject the 'intensive mothering'¹² ideology. However, researchers agree that the 'double burden' is still a persisting phenomenon for working mothers due to the lack of mother-friendly policies in India. With the rise of women writers, literature has shifted from patricentric writing to mother-oriented thinking. Popular Bengali novelists such as Ashapoorna Devi, Nabanita Dev Sen, and Suchitra Bhattacharya have empowered mothers by expressing their voices in classic novels. These authors envision "the mothers celebrating their tribe of their own, rejoicing and basking in the warmth of their own unique glory" (Dey & Das, 2020: 65-67).

Sarkar (2020), in her article "Working for/from Home': An Interdisciplinary Understanding of Mothers in India" considers motherhood study as a part of interdisciplinary studies because of its diverse scope and integrative nature. She discussed the arduous work schedule of mothers who work in confinement in India. The researcher uses 'Amul advertisement'¹³ as a cultural text. She argues how media encourages working mothers to accept

¹⁰ Kolkata is the capital of India's West Bengal state. This city is situated on the east bank of the Hugli River.

¹¹ Kolkata, Bangalore, Mumbai and Delhi are four popular metro cities in India.

¹² Intensive mothering is a dominant form of mothering which involves as child-centered, emotionally laden, and expert-guided mothering practice.

¹³ Amul is an Indian dairy brand. They are famous for selecting a trending topic and make an ad about it.

their 'dual-burden' by giving them several fancy labels such as 'supermom' or 'Favorite all-rounder'. According to her, the 'working mother' tag itself is ambivalent as childcare responsibilities are unpaid and often go unnoticed. The modern working mothers have uncountable childcare responsibilities and household activities, which surpass their 'double-burden' responsibility; they face more of a 'triple-burden' or 'third-shift' as mothers work around the clock to balance work outside of the home along with childcare activities.

Sarkar discusses the unequal contribution of fathers in childcare activities by citing the 2018 ILO report which suggests that "men do an average of 29 minutes of routine unpaid housework per day compared to 312 minutes for women." According to Sarkar, this is one of the most imbalanced gender ratios in the world (Sarkar, 2020). Sarkar further argued that employed mothers often experience 'maternal guilt' for not performing their motherhood duties as per society's standards. Employed mothers are often negatively portrayed as women concerned with their success and attainment of material objects rather than their children's success.

Yadav and Dabhase (2013) in their study titled "Work-life balance amongst the working women in public sector banks – a case study of State Bank of India" define work-life balance as a unique phenomenon that requires equilibrium between responsibilities at work and duties outside of paid-work. They argue that balancing work-life can guarantee the best possible quality of life. A work-life balance not only assures psychological satisfaction among employees but also leads to employee effectiveness and satisfaction. They conclude their research by saying that work pressure from both the private and public spheres affects women's psychological and physiological health to a large extent.

Mother-blaming or the binary construction of good-mothers and bad mothers is an integral part of employed mothers' lives. Employed mothers often face several criticisms for not spending time with children. Society considers them as rebels who break the norm of an 'ideal mother' and ignore their childcare responsibilities because of their career advancement.

In America, researchers have found that maternal employment has less of an impact on children's behavior and academic achievement than researchers in India. The researchers further argued that daughters of employed mothers are more likely to be employed as adults and have higher incomes. Additionally, the sons of employed mothers become independent and more responsible. However, Indian academicians have different approaches to employed mothers. A study conducted by Sivakami (2010) indicates that working women spend less time on childcare related activities than non-working women in rural and urban parts of South India. Her data suggests that the labor force participation of women has negatively impacted on child survival and health. She argues employed mothers devote more time to their younger children than to their older children as they feel the young children are more dependent on mothers than older children. In this context, we suggest that Indian academia needs to adopt a different methodology to understand employed mothers' balancing mechanisms and their children's reactions to it. This orientation will help both governments and private organizations frame mother-friendly policies to help more mothers join the workforce.

Matricentric Feminism: A New Hope for Indian Mothers

In India, feminist scholars have contextualized motherhood into various social realms but fail to address mothers' real-life problems because their theoretical understanding of motherhood is different from America's. When Indian feminists, mostly from the academic background of history and women's studies, were still trying to deconstruct the ideological glorification of

motherhood, O'Reilly (2016) already planned to establish 'Motherhood study' as a separate academic discipline in America. Mothers' struggle for a work-life balance went unnoticed until O'Reilly depicted motherhood in a new light. When mainstream feminists almost sidelined mothers by ignoring their experiences as individuals, O'Reilly opened the door for mothers by offering them a platform to share their maternal experiences. She cited various examples to address real problem that mothers faced. She even claimed that feminists have never given the platform to mothers to voice their experiences and therefore called motherhood 'an unfinished project of feminism'. According to O'Reilly, 'Matricentric feminism' is a mother-centric form of feminism that analyzes mothers' experiences in particular social settings. In different chapters of her book, she portrays mothers as the central subject of her theory and discusses how motherhood is culturally shaped and practiced. According to her, mothers are still underpaid in comparison to non-mothers. Therefore, mothers get drawn into a competitive backdrop, and non-mothers, along with the patriarchal system, become mothers' competitors in the job market. O'Reilly's point is that motherhood and womanhood are different yet share a complex role. She felt that motherhood required a different theoretical paradigm to formulate the research problem in a scientific manner. Therefore, she uses various concepts of motherhood study by eminent researchers to show a path towards 'maternal thinking' or 'matricentric feminism'. Patriarchy defines motherhood based on specific cultural parameters and value systems. This kind of dichotomy makes women's position as mothers inferior and passive. Patriarchy does not allow women to follow their maternal instincts and practice motherhood individually. Therefore, O'Reilly challenged the normative structure of patriarchal motherhood and redefined it by analyzing motherhood as an 'Institution and ideology', 'Identity and subjectivity', and 'Experience and role'.

Here, we would like to argue that Indian mothers need a matricentric mode of feminism because matricentric feminism seeks to make motherhood the business of feminism by positioning mothers' needs and concerns as the starting point for a theory and for politics for women's empowerment. Indian mothers and their daily struggle with both work and childcare responsibilities can be understood only through a thorough analysis of motherhood's social construction and the dilemma of contemporary working mothers to accept it. A journey of a woman and a mother is interrelated but highly misinterpreted in our society. The religious patrons in our community often interpret motherhood as the ultimate marker of success for women. They believe that life becomes complete when a woman behaves as a mother. The same thought has been advanced by Indian policymakers in the 21st century. Therefore, the working women in Indian private sectors are still struggling to sustain themselves. They get a small paid (maximum six months) or unpaid maternity leave after giving birth or adopting a child. Facilities such as breastfeeding support, flexible schedules, workplace discrimination against new mothers, and affordable childcare systems inside offices are still unheard of and far from being practiced in Indian workplaces. While most MNC's have adopted several mother-friendly policies to retain their employees, Indian private companies, including private schools and colleges, are not very bothered by the double-burden that employed mothers face. Indian academia, especially private colleges and universities, support women employees by giving them a fair chance for research and higher career-growth; at the same time, they exclude mothers by not accommodating their needs. Therefore, working mothers often quit their jobs and are forced to be stay-at-home mothers. However, Bengali mothers in Kolkata believe that motherhood is a beautiful journey if one negates its ideological formation and redefines the concept from their point of view.

But in the present study we were able further problematize this tension between career and motherhood, identify different ways through which mothers balance their roles at home and the workplace, and how it is always not a choice between either and or. To begin with, most of our respondents (new age Bengali employed mothers in Kolkata) believe that motherhood is a beautiful journey if one negates its ideological formation and redefines the concept from one's own point of view. Through this paper, we aim to come up with a detailed account of how Bengali working mothers face various challenges in their day-to-day lives and examine the ways in which they overcome barriers and present themselves as role models for the generation to come.

Methodology

For the purpose of collecting detailed first-hand narratives of the employed mothers, we developed a semi-structured interview schedule. Data was collected from full time employed mothers in Kolkata. Due to the required specificity of the respondents a purposive sampling method was adopted in order to have some common ground of analysis, and the snowball method was also employed. The data was collected in various urban areas of south Kolkata for almost two months in 2019. Among all the responses collected, data of twenty-nine heterosexual Hindu, married, full-time mothers working in different private sectors in Kolkata were identified for the purpose of analysis.

Most of our respondents were primarily from an upper-middle-class background and had children between the age of 1-10 years. Children in this age group are highly dependent on their mothers. The average age of the respondent was 32 years old. The age of the youngest participant was 30, and the oldest was 40. This study employed a qualitative in-depth interview method to gather data. The researchers collected oral informed consent before each interview. The interviews were first recorded and then transcribed. The transcribed interviews were analyzed using a grounded theory approach as grounded theory provides detailed and systematic procedures for data collection, analysis, and theorizing (Strauss, 1987). Data analysis has been done using thematic analysis. Pseudo names are used to protect the identity of our respondents.

Findings

This section has been divided into three sub-sections based on three main themes such as balancing work and childcare without guilt, supportive roles of fathers in childcare, and my motherhood, my way. These themes have emerged from the thematic analysis of the interview data. We will analyze each of these themes separately, using quotes from the interviews to illustrate the subthemes that emerged under each central theme.

Balancing Work and Childcare Without Guilt

The most prominent feature in all women's everyday mothering is a never-ending struggle to arrange their own lives as working mothers in a way that benefits their children. For example, Gitashree, a 30-year-old working in HR and the mother of a three-year-old child, said "sometimes I wish I had many hands like Durga Ma. I have to manage almost everything; from the school drop off, attending back-to-back meetings, planning the next major initiatives,

managing office politics, being a great wife, daughter, mother, cousin, neighbor- the list is endless."

But there are others who have learned the trick. For instance, Soma, a 33-year-old newspaper editor and a mother of two small children, said, "I have rearranged my life; I do not carry out any projects from the time I pick up the children at the daycare center until they go to bed at night". It's all about the skill of managing one's work and childcare."

Similarly, Bithi, a 33-year-old private college teacher, feels that motherhood is not an easy job, especially when the mother works for a private organization. She said, "Sometimes, I don't get much time to play or talk to my baby. But it's ok; even she has to understand the challenges of a working mother. I want my daughter to acknowledge my economic contribution to our family and to her life, which was not possible for me as a daughter, because my mother was not economically independent and therefore, we were always financially dependent on our father."

Adding to the narrative, Madhulagna, a 37-year-old assistant professor feels that modern-day Bengali mothers are different from the previous generation of mothers. She said, "My mother quit her job to give us a good upbringing, but I will never quit my job as it gives me immense pleasure and a separate identity apart from being someone's mother or someone's wife."

In summary, the above narratives of Bengali employed mothers in Kolkata shows that they consider themselves 'transitional women' (Hochschild, 1990) who want to manage both household responsibilities including childcare and jobs.

Supportive Roles of Fathers in Childcare

Equal parenting or sharing childcare responsibilities has become normalized in many homes in Kolkata, primarily in homes where both parents work full or part-time. The new-age fathers are aware of their children's psychological and emotional needs. Many contemporary fathers are very active in childcare not because their wives are employed, but because they enjoy it.

Sneha, a 34-year-old working mother said: "I am a medical representative. My husband is a great father. He took work from home option just to take care of our children. I am blessed". Another working mother, Kaveri, says "managing mothering and work is tough unless your partner helps you in childcare. My partner cooks for my children when I come late from the office. This new parenting is a good practice because my elder son is learning the same thing from his father what he can practice as a husband in future".

In summary, fathers' attitudes toward childcare activities have changed considerably in recent years. Bengali fathers now spend more time engaged in child care than they did half a century ago. This hints at a progressive shift towards gender-neutral childcare which further complicates the debates around paternity leave. And while this debate falls outside the scope of this paper, it is an important one that certainly demands attention from researchers.

My Motherhood, My Way

The meaning and experience of motherhood are unique for each mother in our society. Sociologically, motherhood consists of various social expectations, individual experiences, and cultural constructions. Fionna Joy Green (2019), a popular feminist mother and professor has suggested an 'affirmative mothering' practice as a replacement for patriarchal motherhood.

According to her, feminist parents challenge the institution of motherhood as they are aware of the patriarchal construction of motherhood. As a result, mothering practices bring positive changes to their lives which, in turn, will influence feminist political activism and empower both mothers and children. My data also suggests that twenty-first-century enlightened women believe that their choice of mothering may change their children's attitudes towards gender equality and human relationships in future.

Speaking in a guiltless tone, Adrita, a 36-year-old software engineer said "I surely don't fit in the definition of a good mother who cooks well, keeps everything in perfect condition or runs to the doctor every time my daughters fall sick. But the amazing thing is my daughters have accepted me the way I am. I don't want to be a perfect mother."

Similarly, Gitashree described her motherhood journey: "My kids love me a lot; they idolize me as Devi Durga. They want to be like me in the future. I teach them many additional valuable lessons, such as work ethic, organizational skills, adaptability, and so on." Very interestingly, Sneha, a 34-year-old working mother, believes that "good mothers don't exist. Good parenting exists." This completely contradicts the way popular culture has painted mothers' portrayals.

Another employed mother, Kaveri, takes the role of mother beyond stereotypical constructions. She believes that "a good mother is not only one who cooks a good meal for her children or stays home for 24/7 with them. A mother should be both financial and emotional support for her children". The new generation of mothers adopt different child-care techniques to balance both their jobs and mothering. Adrita clearly stated, "Daycare centers take good care of my daughters. So, what's wrong in that?" Another employed mother said, "My Company took good care of my newborn baby; they allowed me to take breaks in between and go for breastfeeding."

Hays (1996) pointed out that by placing intensive mothering ideology as the highest ideal for mothers, our society has imposed unrealistic burdens on mothers. Therefore, employed mothers often feel guilty and anxious for not achieving it. However, the new age Bengali employed mothers' perceptions are different. They want to balance both their mothering and childcare in their own ways. Therefore, following Rich (1995:239), we can say that "the words are being spoken now, are being written down, the taboos are being broken, the masks of motherhood are being cracked through".

The narratives of contemporary Bengali mothers demonstrate a radical shift from intensive mothering to transitional mothering where mothers negate the idea of 'having it all' and therefore have chosen to redefine motherhood realistically.

Conclusion

An empirical study conducted by Lyn Craig (O'Dorchai, 2010) on contemporary mothers found that mothers' workloads are greater than fathers. The idea that mothers shoulder a more significant proportion of the total workload in families due to their official responsibilities and childcare has become a contested phenomenon in sociology (Hanson *et al.*, 1997). According to Hochschild, (2012) the 'Second Shift' affects employed mothers as they reported feelings of guilt and a lack of sexual interest and sleep, and working mothers in Bengal are no exception. They spend their days performing double shifts. However, 21st century Bengali employed mothers feel that working is essential for monetary satisfaction and maintaining their position as financially independent figures in their family.

The new age employed mothers in Bengal believe that there shouldn't be a dichotomy between good mothers and bad mothers as nobody can judge mothering. Motherhood is all about raising children with good values and a proper education. The new generation of enlightened mothers act in a self-respecting way and lead their life as full people and contribute to shaping their children's attitudes about gender equality and human relationships. Even though employed mothers face the challenge of balancing childcare tasks with a paid job, the Bengali working mothers recognized themselves as better mothers than their own mothers. From well-established educated families, these women are fully aware of the importance of economic independence and seek fulfillment in their careers. They challenge patriarchal norms of social coercion in their quest for a more egalitarian family (Dutta & Husain, 2010). Therefore, contemporary employed mothers are actively involved in redefining motherhood in a more humane way.

A limitation of our study is that we did not interview children of these new generation employed mothers. Thus, we do not have the perspective of the children on the work-life balance of their mothers. Also, we did not observe the employed mothers and other family members' interactions, including children and husbands. Therefore, we are relying on the narratives as described by the employed mothers. Another limitation of the study is that it did not include mothers from different class and ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, it is difficult for us to generalize their experiences as a whole.

Future researchers could include ethnographic and policy-oriented research to investigate the daily struggles of employed mothers and find out relevant solutions to complement this work. It would also be useful to expand this work to other areas of India to determine whether this new motherhood practice is unique to Kolkata.

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